

## Preparing a Response to the Site Visit Team's Report

### Background

Approximately eight weeks after the site visit's completion, the dean or program director will receive a copy of the site visit team's report. The report will detail all of the team's findings regarding the school or program's compliance with each applicable criterion and will briefly describe the reasoning or evidence that led to the team's findings.

CEPH's *Accreditation Procedures, amended June 2010* note that "In addition to supplying factual corrections, a school or program may prepare a written response to the team's findings. In this response, it is appropriate to note any disagreements with the findings and opinions of the team or to provide supplemental information that may be helpful to the Council's deliberations." Factual corrections (misspelled names, incorrect committee titles or course numbers) can be presented simply in a chart or list format. This document discusses common questions and issues relating to the second component, the optional written response.

### **Should we address all "partially met" criteria in the written response? All criteria found "met with commentary?"**

No. This is a common misperception. The opportunity for response exists for a number of reasons: to comport with good accreditation practice; to ensure due process in accreditation decisions; and to assist the Council in making consistent and accurate decisions. There is no one response format that fits all schools and programs, and providing responses to each of the team's findings can hinder, rather than help, the Council's efforts to focus on the issues that are most salient to your school or program's review.

Provide a response in areas where you have substantive information that will elucidate the Council's review in a way that is not already documented in the record (ie, in the self-study and site visit team's report). You may use the response as an opportunity to document areas of disagreement, differing interpretations or significant developments since the site visit, but you are not required to respond to areas that you feel are already well and accurately documented.

### **If we can correct a problem that was cited in the site visit team's report and explain this in the response, will the Council change the finding?**

In most cases, this is not possible. The self-study and site visit process are designed to be in-depth fact-finding opportunities, and the Council typically changes site visit teams' findings on individual criteria *only* when they need to do so to ensure consistency in application of the criteria across all of the Council's work.

In a few cases, if a deficiency is simple and quickly correctable, a school or program may take all action necessary to ensure compliance during the time that elapses between the site visit and the response submission. If this is true, the response must document the actions taken thoroughly, such that the Council can fully ascertain compliance in the response and would not gain any new information or benefit from future reporting.

Example 1: The site visit team finds a program has partially met Criterion 1.1 because it has not defined goals or objectives related to service. The program's site visit is early in the season, seven months prior to the response due date. The program immediately mobilizes a broad-based committee of constituents to develop a service goal and objectives. After a thorough and thoughtful process, the program promulgates the new goal and objectives, ratifies it through all appropriate channels, identifies data collection mechanisms and responsible parties and updates all of its web, print and other materials to reflect the now-revised mission, goals and objectives. If the response documents all of this process thoroughly (including timelines, committee meetings and copies of updated websites, etc.), the Council

may find that there is nothing further for the program to report on. In this case the Council might change the team's finding.

Example 2: The site visit team finds that a school has partially met Criterion 2.3 because it does not ensure that all MPH students have adequate preparation in the core area of environmental health sciences. The school's visit is early in the season, seven months prior to the response due date. The dean's office immediately charges senior administrators and appropriate faculty, students and other constituents to address the issue. By the time of the response, the school has developed a new environmental health course, had it approved through all university channels and updated all of its web and print materials to indicate that all students will now be required to take the course. The school will offer the course for the first time in the semester that follows the response's submission. In this case, the Council would typically *not* change the team's decision. The Council will appreciate a succinct summary of such efforts in the response, but since the change has not yet been implemented and is, as yet, untested, the Council can not verify that the school has achieved compliance.

The bottom line is that the Council prefers that schools and programs take the necessary time to fix problems thoroughly. Such an approach is preferable to a reactive one that focuses on fixing a problem quickly in order to meet the response deadline.

### **Are there any other circumstances in which the Council changes a finding?**

The Council is not able to investigate issues in the depth that a site visit team can; therefore, in general, the Council will defer to the team and require further reporting.

If a site visit team returned a finding that was not fully consistent with the Council's interpretation of the criteria, however, the Council will change the finding. This is not uncommon and is a fundamental part of the Council's "leveling" role, as the Council sees all reports across all site visit teams. In some cases, the Council's drive for consistency may result in a lower finding than the site visit team returned. This occurs when the self-study and site visit team's report provide evidence of noncompliance but the team returned a finding of met or met with commentary.

### **What form should the response take?**

Your response can be structured as a letter to the Council, via the Council's president. It is helpful if you use bullets or headers to separate each point or area of discussion and structure your response with reference to specific criteria and/or pages in the site visit team's report.

You must submit one electronic copy to [submissions@ceph.org](mailto:submissions@ceph.org).

### **How long should the response be?**

Effective responses range from one paragraph to several pages. You may include appendices to your response if they are relevant.

### **What happens to the response?**

Staff will append the response, in full, to the report before forwarding the materials for Councilors to review one month before the Council meeting.

### **Are there any other materials that the Council reviews when making the accreditation decision?**

The Council sends a letter to the chief executive (president or chancellor) of your university or college approximately one month before the Council meeting, after you have submitted your factual corrections and response. The letter accompanies a copy of the site visit team's report with any factual corrections made. We do not append your response to the copy of the site visit team's report that we send to the university executive, but we encourage you to share your response if you wish. In the letter, the Council

invites the executive to provide written comment to the Council prior to the Council's meeting. Such comments are highly optional and, when provided, typically express support or provide an administrators' level-perspective on the importance of the program or school.

Thus, before the Council returns an accreditation decision, all Councilors have access to 1) the final self-study and appendix; 2) the site visit team's report; 3) your response; and 4) the response of your university or college's chief executive (president or chancellor), if provided.

### **Dos and Don'ts**

- **Don't** redo one or more sections of your self-study. Your response should be succinct and tailored and should not be structured as a self-study document.
- **Do** be specific—include concrete details, including dates and responsible individuals.
- **Don't** weigh down your submission with extraneous discussion or detail. Your response is most effective when it contributes a new perspective or information that isn't already in the record.
- **Do** consult with CEPH staff if you have specific questions. They are happy to help!